ERIE EAST SIDE HIGHWAY ACCESS (SR 4034-A40)

PRELIMINARY DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL CLEARANCE

The Erie East Side Access (ESA) highway study was initiated back in 1962 with a series of transportation studies intended to address deficiencies within the east side of Erie and the adjacent communities. This effort was then expanded with additional studies in the 1970's and mid-1980's. Unfortunately, the 1986 East Side Access to I-90 Route Location Feasibility Study was ultimately rejected by the public due to significant opposition to the designation of the recommended corridors.

In 1990, the Erie County Planning Department initiated another first step to relieve the increasingly deficient roadway system on the east side of Erie. The end product of this effort resulted in an Erie East Side Needs Analysis, which became the source document for the Environmental Impact Statement that was developed jointly by the Federal Highway Administration, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation – Engineering District 1-0 and their design consultant, GAI Consultants, Inc. and many local partners.

The key to the overall environmental process was an extensive agency coordination and public participation program. This effort was lead by PennDOT's District Engineer, the District's Community Relations Coordinator (CRC) and the Project Team. The program included the following major activities:

- Agency Coordination Meetings (aided by interactive GIS technology – a PennDOT first)
- Resource agency and local government contacts for data retrieval
- Public contacts for data retrieval
- One-on-one interviews with local officials, members of the business community, Erie-area community organizations and the individual members of the general public
- Community Advisory Committee (CAC) meetings
- Focus Group Meetings
- Project Newsletters
- Public Informational Meetings and Plans Displays

The dynamic of the Project Development Process was detailed by the Bureau of Environmental Quality (BEQ) at the approximate time that the ESA project was stepping beyond the confines of an engineering analysis. Indeed, the process was evolving to integrate the necessary engineering and environmental analysis with the concurrent development of a responsive community outreach effort. Emphasis was to be placed on building consensus on sensitive issues.

In addition, the District CRC was a member of the Statewide Task force that developed the Public Involvement Handbook, giving the District intimate insight into the evolution of the procedure.

As a consequence, the District took a progressive approach to the development of a customer sensitive public involvement process:

1. The District committed to finding a mutually agreed upon solution to the transportation problem statement. An open, fair and responsive process was designed.
2. The District took advantage of every available opportunity for discussion with the general public, public officials, community organizations, business leaders and special interest groups.
3. Solicitation for public input and ideas was made through every media and public contact. The public was to have a significant role in the decision-making process.

4. Focus Group meetings were held to accommodate individuals with a singular area of concern. This forum ranged in size from 2 individuals to 1,100 persons. This initiative allowed more intimate contact between the project team and group leaders, adding to our credibility when tangible solutions were discussed and detailed.
5. District Engineer, Jack Baker, lead every major public meeting and focus group meeting that was held. The high visibility and high profile nature of the, at times, emotional process made it imperative to have a high-ranking official at the helm of these efforts. Despite a significant verbal barrage that was endured early in the process, the project team was effective at developing the trust of the public and enhancing the public's image of PennDOT.
6. A Community Advisory Committee was formed. This group was used to steer the project team and tapped directly into the pulse of the Erie community.
7. The project team was to work on two key consensus building elements: 1) unity of purpose; and, 2) equal access to power for all members.

The "quality" of this program was evident at the April 11, 1996 public hearing, where the FHWA, The Army Corps of Engineers, public officials, and the media heard the public praise the District's exhaustive public outreach efforts. In the next morning's local paper it was reported that "Alternative 3 [recommended alternative] hits no roadblocks at public meeting." The expectations for a fair and responsible environmental and alternatives development process had been realized.

It is worthy to note that due to the dynamic nature of the public involvement program the District was not able to script operations and develop pre-conceived alternatives. Being truly representative of the public input, the alternatives were developed, in large part, as a consequence of the process. The project team, through monthly coordination meetings, was able to maintain the project schedule with meticulous planning and detailed action plans, which described each member's responsibilities and kept everyone focused.

As important as the public involvement component was, another key element to environmental streamlining was continual coordination and open communication with the environmental review agencies. The pioneering use of a Geographic Information System (GIS) and the innovative technique in developing an archaeological predictive model were two examples of highly useful means of conveying information to the environmental agencies. These techniques also proved to be economical when applied to the region as large (25 sq. mi.) as the East Side Access Study area.

The intent of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 makes it mandatory to include the public in the transportation planning and decision-making process. The District successfully engaged this concept when past experience within the same project study area had failed.

No benchmark currently existed for this type of work effort. Many of the quality attributes can be summarized as "intangibles" such as improved public image, trust and credibility.

Through the efforts of the project team, the cooperation, patience and input from the public and the attentiveness and open-mindedness of the environmental review agencies; the environmental process for this project was streamlined while maintaining the integrity and preserving the intent of that process. A highly successful and much anticipated transportation improvement was achieved.